

Committee on Government Reform

CONGRESSMAN TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN



NEWS RELEASE

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Davis Hails House Passage of "Government Network Security Act"

Washington, D.C. – The U.S. House of Representatives today approved H.R. 3159, the "Government Network Security Act of 2003," bipartisan legislation introduced by Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) and Ranking Member Henry Waxman (D-CA) that will greatly enhance the federal government's abilities to protect the security and privacy of its computer systems.

H.R. 3159 requires executive branch departments and agencies to take steps to protect government computers and information from the risks posed by the use of peer-to-peer file sharing programs. Peer-to-peer file sharing programs are Internet applications that allow users to download and directly share electronic files from other users on the same network. These programs are surging in popularity with millions of people trading music, images and documents over these networks at any given time.

While most of the news coverage on file sharing focuses on the ability of users to illegally trade copyrighted music, movies, and videos, another less publicized dark side to this technology is the risk it poses to the security of computers and the privacy of electronic information.

Few people recognize these risks. At a hearing held by the Committee on Government Reform in May, Members heard from computer security experts who discussed the privacy and security risks created by these programs. And through a couple of simple searches on one file sharing program, Committee staff easily obtained completed tax returns, medical records, confidential legal documents, and business files.

"We learned that using these programs can be similar to giving a complete stranger access to your personal file cabinet," Davis said. "Needless to say, file sharing programs create a number of risks for federal departments and agencies if they are installed on government computers. The federal government uses and stores a wide variety of classified and sensitive information, including information vital to national security, public health, and the personal and financial records of U.S. citizens and businesses. Installing these programs on government

computers can cause this sensitive information to be exposed to the public. Because files are shared anonymously on peer to peer networks, there is also a risk of the spread of viruses, worms, and other malicious computer files.”

Both the House of Representatives and Senate have successfully taken steps to protect congressional computers through both technical and non-technical means, including firewalls and employee training. Unlike Congress, however, executive branch departments and agencies do not have similar policies. This legislation would require agencies to develop and implement such policies to protect government information and computers.

“File sharing technology is not inherently bad, and it may turn out to have a variety of beneficial applications,” Davis said. “H.R. 3159 recognizes this by protecting the ability of federal agencies to pursue innovations in peer-to-peer technology on government networks, as long as they do not put government information or computers at risk. This bill takes a common sense approach to protect the computers and networks of the federal government and the valuable information they contain.”

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